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Action research for professional development

Concise advice for new action researchers

Jean McNiff

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Third edition © Jean McNiff 2002

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Introduction to the third edition

The text presented here originally took the form of a small booklet. The First Edition was published in 1995, and since then the booklet has travelled far, appearing in professional education courses in universities, schools and workplaces around the world.

I am placing the work here in celebration of two special events. The first event is that I have (finally!) succeeded in establishing a web site. The second event is that this year marks the twenty-first anniversary of my learning partnership with Jack Whitehead.

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This text is as much Jack's as mine. For the last 21 years, Jack has been a major influence in my life of education. During that time our ideas have developed through our own caring, creatively critical conversations. While some specific ideas that appear in this text belong to one or other of us (for example, Jack's action plans, his ideas about the living 'I', about experiencing oneself as a living contradiction, and about the nature of living educational theories; and Jean's ideas about the generative transformational nature of the evolutionary processes of human enquiry), many of the ideas have been developed collaboratively. It is a remarkable partnership, especially in light of the fact that we don't see each other that often, given that Jack lives and works in Bath, and Jean commutes from her home in Dorset to work in Ireland. When we do see each other, therefore, it is an all the more intensely rich experience, for we have much to catch up on and new ideas to talk through.

Both Jack and I are passionately interested in issues concerning knowledge, especially the forms of knowledge and knowledge creation that action research embodies. I have learnt from Jack the power of sharing ideas to generate new ones, and how we need to use our technologies to make those ideas freely accessible to all. Because of this commitment to sharing ideas, this text is no longer available as a commercial publication, but is here, free, to use as you wish.

We invite you to become part of our educative conversations. You can do this by accessing www.actionresearch.net, or www.jeanmcniff.com.

You might know people whose language is other than English. If they wish to translate this text into their languages, they should feel free to do so. Please also let me have a copy of the translation for this web site, so that others can benefit too.

If you care to give feedback to this text, please do so, and I will explore ways of amending the text accordingly, and also creating a forum for our discussions.

Here's to the next twenty-one years of learning!

Jean McNiff

Introduction to the first edition (slightly amended)

Action research is becoming increasingly known as an approach that encourages practitioners to be in control of their own lives and contexts. It began in the USA, came to prominence in the UK in the 1970s, and by the 1980s it was making a significant impact in many professional contexts, particularly in teacher professional education. Now its influence is world wide, and has spread to virtually all areas where personal and professional learning is undertaken.

This text aims to provide some general answers for the many people who ask, 'What exactly is action research?' A number of excellent books are available to give more detailed responses, and you can find some of them in the 'bibliographies' section of this web site. Here I am hoping to give a brief gloss about what action research is, and how

helpful it can be in our hopes to improve the quality of life through learning.

You should know that there are different approaches to action research, as is true of scientific enquiry in general. Hot debates and often real disagreements take place, about the nature and focus of action research, how it is done, who does it, why, and what the outcomes might be. Yet there would seem to be general agreement among the community of action researchers, at least in theory, that action research is based on certain principles – the need for justice and democracy, the right of all people to speak and be heard, the right of each individual to show how and why they have given extra attention to their learning in order to improve their work, the deep need to experience truth and beauty in our personal and professional lives.

This booklet offers one particular approach to action research. This approach has been developed by Jack Whitehead and others working in and with the University of Bath, UK (see www.actionresearch.net). I am not claiming that this is the only way, nor necessarily the best way, but it seems to me the most appropriate way available at the moment to address the principles outlined above.

One of the values I hold is the right of each one of us to experience freedom with justice. Therefore I do encourage you to read other work and other opinions, so that you can make up your own mind about what is most appealing to you and most appropriate for your own situation. Finding out what is available before deciding on any one option is responsible practice.

In the meantime, do be aware that this guide offers a limited but useful overview of what action research is, how to do it, and what its use value might be for your life.

I hope you will be inspired to find out more about action research and do it yourself.

Jean McNiff

Action Research for Professional Development

What is action research?

Action research is a term which refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. Because action research is done by you, the practitioner, it is often referred to as practitioner based research; and because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice.

The idea of self reflection is central. In traditional forms of research – empirical research – researchers do research on other people. In action research, researchers do research on themselves. Empirical researchers enquire into other people's lives. Action researchers enquire into their own. Action research is an enquiry conducted by the self into the self. You, a practitioner, think about your own life and work, and this involves you asking yourself why you do the things that you do, and why you are the way that you are. When you produce your research report, it shows how you have carried out a systematic investigation into your own behaviour, and the reasons for that behaviour. The report shows the process you have gone through in order to achieve a better understanding of

yourself, so that you can continue developing yourself and your work.

Action research is open ended. It does not begin with a fixed hypothesis. It begins with an idea that you develop. The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen. Seen in this way, action research is a form of self evaluation. It is used widely in professional contexts such as appraisal, mentoring and self assessment.

A useful way to think about action research is that it is a strategy to help you live in a way that you feel is a good way. It helps you live out the things you believe in, and it enables you to give good reasons every step of the way.

Who does action research?

You do. *I* do. Potentially, *we all* do.

Think about any event when you had no idea how to do something, yet you found out through tackling it in a systematic way. For example, how many tries did it take before you stopped falling off your bike and actually rode it? You probably did not stop after each fall and rationalise why you were falling off. The chances are you just tried out new strategies until you were successful.

This is the basic action principle underpinning action research. It involves identifying a problematic issue, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it (did it work?), and changing practice in the light of the evaluation. This is what many people do in numerous life situations.

The process described so far is a basic problem solving process. To turn it into an action research process you would need to say why you wanted to investigate an issue (this can be anything, such as riding your bike, or developing good communication practices throughout your organisation), and gather data to show the process. You would then turn the data into evidence in terms of whether you felt you were living in the direction of what you hoped to achieve in the first place. You would express your hopes not as abstract objectives, but as goals that are in line with your values.

Most of us do a kind of informal action research in many aspects of our lives, though we probably don't call what we do action research. Informal action research is undertaken in many workplace contexts as part of on-the-job professional learning. When we put a discipline or structure on our everyday learning from experience, and make it clear to other people how we know what we are doing, we can say that we are doing action research. Many workplaces now encourage practitioners to undertake formal action enquiries as part of their professional learning, often leading to accreditation.

Action research began in the USA during the 1940s through the work of Kurt Lewin, a social scientist. It actually began in other places as well, but Lewin's work is generally taken as the starting point. It was popular in the USA for a time, but then went into decline because of cultural, political and economic changes.

It emerged in the 1970s in Britain through several influences. One major influence was the work of Lawrence Stenhouse who directed the Humanities Curriculum Project. He believed that the curriculum ought to be organised in schools so that it was meaningful and relevant to students' experience, and they should be encouraged to take on the responsibility of their own learning. He also promoted the idea of 'teacher as researcher'.

Action research was developed mainly by academics in higher education, who saw it as a

useful way of working in professional education, particularly teacher education. They began studying and clarifying the steps involved, and also the principles underpinning action research, such as the need for democratic practices, care and respect for the individual, and the need for disciplined enquiry. Action research is today prominent not only in teacher professional education but also in management education and organisation studies, social and health care work, and other professional contexts.

Over the years, various models and different interpretations of action research have developed. Some people prioritise technical aspects, believing that it is important to get the method right. Other people are also interested in the values that inform action research, such as a belief that people should be in control of their work and the way they conduct that work, and how the research can lead to a living out of those values. Most people recognise the educational base of action research. These different perspectives generate lively debates. There is no one 'correct' way; you must decide what is right for you, and develop your own views. To do that, however, you need to do some action research; the 'meaning' it has for you emerges as you do the research and explain what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Action research and professional learning

Action research is used in many professional learning contexts, both formally and informally. Action enquiries begin with the question, 'How do I improve my work?' This perspective is quite different from traditional views of professional education, which often take the form of training. In traditional forms, the usual procedure is that an acknowledged expert offers advice to professionals (who are then usually positioned as trainees). More enlightened forms of professional learning programmes work on the assumption that professionals already have a good deal of professional knowledge, and are highly capable of learning for themselves. What they need in their professional learning is an appropriate form of support to help them celebrate what they already know, and also generate new knowledge. New knowledge can most effectively be generated through dialogue with others who are equally interested in the process of learning. The dialogue is always a dialogue of equals. No one tells another what to do in action enquiries; we all share and value one another's learning.

The question 'How do I improve my work?' contains a social intent. The intention is that one person improves their work for their own benefit and the benefit of others. If you can improve what you are doing (at least improve your understanding of what you are doing), there is a good chance you will influence the situation you are working in. Your increased awareness and your readiness to be self critical will probably have an influence on the people you are working with. You are aiming to influence them for the better. There is nothing sinister in the idea of influence, and everything to celebrate; most ideas that people have were influenced by someone else, somewhere else in time and space. This is the way that knowledge evolves, a process of learning from others and reworking existing knowledge in new ways.

The methodology of action research means that you have to evaluate what you are doing. You need to check constantly that what you are doing really is working. Are you really influencing your situation or are you fooling yourself? This awareness of the need for self evaluation shows your willingness to accept responsibility for your own thinking and action. Accountability is part of good professional practice. You are always aware that you have to give good service, to attend to the needs of others in the way that is best for them, and to show that you have responsible attitudes and behaviour. In doing action research you are giving an account of yourself. You are showing that you are a responsible person and can justify what you are doing with good reason. Action research helps you to formalise your learning and give a clear and justified account of your work, not on a one-off basis, but as a continuing regular feature of your practice.

Professional assessment and appraisal

Ongoing assessment is an increasingly regular feature of professional working arrangements. The idea of incremental learning is also increasingly accepted, when people build on previous learning, developing and transforming past practice in new contexts. It is anticipated that people can transfer their skills and knowledge to work requiring a higher level of expertise. Formative (ongoing) assessment monitors this kind of professional incrementalism, and allows practitioners to evaluate and modify their actions as appropriate.

Appraisal is also part of professional development programmes, and action research offers a new focus that enables people to celebrate their learning together. Social relationships tend to change. Traditionally, appraisal has been seen as the responsibility of a manager who is authorised to make judgements about the professionalism and competence of staff. Action research is a form of personal self evaluation, and also creates contexts for critical conversations in which all participants can learn as equals. Action enquiries begin with an individual's question, 'How do I improve my work?'. When the enquiry is shared with others, and they wish to become involved – possibly by critiquing, or by deciding to do something similar, or by offering ideas for new enquiries – then the question changes to 'How do we improve our work?'. Appraisal and professional assessment become a context for collaborative learning in the workplace.

How do I do action research?

The basic steps of an action research process constitute an action plan:

- We review our current practice,
- identify an aspect that we want to investigate,
- imagine a way forward,
- try it out, and
- take stock of what happens.
- We modify what we are doing in the light of what we have found, and continue working in this new way (try another option if the new way of working is not right)
- monitor what we do,
- review and evaluate the modified action,
- and so on ...

(see also McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996, and forthcoming)

Two processes are at work: your systematic actions as you work your way through these steps, and your learning. Your actions embody your learning, and your learning is informed by your reflections on your actions. Therefore, when you come to write your report or make your research public in other ways, you should aim to show not only the actions of your research, but also the learning involved. Some researchers focus only on the actions and procedures, and this can weaken the authenticity of the research.

A number of models are available in the literature. Most of them regard practice as non-linear, appreciating that people are unpredictable, and that their actions often do not follow a straightforward trajectory. The action plan above shows action reflection as a cycle of

identify an area of practice to be investigated;

imagine a solution;

implement the solution;

evaluate the solution;

change practice in light of the evaluation ...

This action research cycle can now turn into new action research cycles, as new areas of investigation emerge. It is possible to imagine a series of cycles to show the processes of developing practice. The processes can be shown as a spiral of cycles, where one issue forms the basis of another and, as one question is addressed, the answer to it generates new questions.

Remember that things do not often proceed in a neat, linear fashion. Most people experience research as a zig-zag process of continual review and re-adjustment. Research reports should communicate the seeming incoherence of the process in a coherent way.

The generative transformational nature of evolutionary processes

My own view is that we live in a deeply unified universe, where all things are connected, often in very distant ways, but their effects are evident in the lives of everyone – the ‘butterfly effect’, where the beat of a butterfly’s wing locally can have repercussions in far-flung global terms. For me, all open-ended systems have the potential to transform themselves into richer versions of themselves. Humans and human interactions, by the fact that they are living, are open systems. I like the following diagram, to show the process of development as an expanding spiral. This diagram captures (I hope) the dynamic movement of consciousness, practice, dialogue, social formations. It is bounded only by mortality. The model is frequently adopted (and adapted) in the literature.

(diagram coming soon)

What is the focus of action research?

Different researchers concentrate on different aspects of action research. Some are interested in procedures. As long as the action steps are right, they feel, this is good action research. The quality of action research is judged rather as ballroom dancing or ice skating: specific steps are executed in a specific sequence with anticipated outcomes. Other researchers feel that a focus on method is not enough. They believe that action research can help us make sense of our lives. We need to move beyond the surface structure of method (although this is still important), and look at the deep underlying structure of our values and intentions in living our lives.

Values into practice

Every one of us lives according to values. There are no overarching structures of values to tell us which values to hold; each one of us makes our own choices. Some people believe in the rights of individuals; others do not see individuals as having rights. Business tends to work on a different set of values than health care. It is not unusual for values systems to be in conflict, and this is when problems can arise. People often are not able to resolve the situation and live together with their different values.

Action research begins with values. As a self reflective practitioner you need to be aware of what drives your life and work, so you can be clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it. You might need to spend time clarifying for yourself the kinds of values and commitments you hold. This would be a firm starting point for your action enquiry.

Sometimes we say we believe in something, but are unable to live according to what we believe, for a variety of reasons. Here we would experience ourselves, in Jack Whitehead's words, as 'living contradictions'. A point of entry for action research would be to find ways of overcoming the contradiction so that we might live more fully in the direction of our values.

Action planning

A number of action plans are available in the literature. The action plan that has grown in popularity around the world is the one developed by Jack Whitehead. The aim is to encourage you, a practitioner, to ask critical questions about your own practice, and find the answers for yourself. No one else can give you answers. Other people can comment and advise, but only you can say what is right for you and your situation. It could be that there are no answers to your particular issue, but the process of asking questions is as important as finding answers.

Here is a modified version of Jack's action plan. On the next page, the plan is explained in greater detail.

- What issue am I interested in researching?
- Why do I want to research this issue?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show why I am interested in this issue?
- What can I do? What will I do?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show that I am having an influence?
- How can I explain that influence?
- How can I ensure that any judgements I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

There is always a dilemma between suggesting action plans and avoiding making them appear as prescriptive. In action research, everyone takes responsibility for their own practice and for asking their own questions. You do need to ensure, however, that your research is reasonably systematic and rigorous. In doing your research you are aiming to make a claim that you have improved practice, so you do need to produce validated evidence to support that claim.

The action plan in detail

In deciding to do action research, you are showing your intent to learn more about a particular issue within a particular situation. Your research is a conduit for your learning. It can take the following form:

What issue are you interested in researching?

Ask yourself, 'What is especially high in my mind at the moment?' The research issue you identify could be wide in range and scope, such as the state of the economy or the working ethos of your organisation. It could also be narrowly focused on one small area, such as how you can maintain your diary systematically. Often what might appear as a small issue turns out to be symptomatic of much wider ones.

Some researchers present the idea of a research issue as a problem. Action research is not only problem solving, though it contains elements of problem solving. It does mean problematising issues and engaging with them; questioning what is happening, and asking how it might be improved. This then involves asking questions about the conditions that are allowing the situation to be as it is, and finding ways of changing the conditions. The main point is to identify an area you wish to investigate, and be reasonably clear about why you wish to get involved.

It is important, in your first action enquiries, to be reasonably sure that you can do something about the issue you have identified. You should be practical and ask, 'Can I actually do something about this issue? Can I influence the situation, or is it outside my scope?' If it really is outside your scope you should be realistic and leave it. Having said that, do not give up altogether. Aim to address one small aspect of your work. While it might be true that you cannot change the world, you can certainly change your bit of it; and if everyone changed a small bit at a time, a lot of change could happen quickly.

Once you have identified a research issue, you should formulate a research question. This can be stated in terms of

How do I ...?'

For example,

- How do I improve my relationships with my colleagues?
- How do I help John overcome his fear of flying?
- How do I manage my work schedule more efficiently?

The main ideas are:

- I am asking a real question about something that is important to me, and I am hoping to find ways of engaging with it;
- I am a real person;
- I am trying to improve something; this might be my own understanding, or it might be an aspect of the social situation I am in (remember: improvement does not mean perfection. Any improvement is still improvement, no matter how small).

Why are you interested?

You need to be reasonably clear why you want to get involved. The reasons for our actions are often rooted in our values base, that is, the things we believe in and that drive our lives. If you believe that all people have equal rights, you will try to ensure that your workplace is a place in which everyone does have equal rights, and you will organise

your own work so that everyone has the opportunity to exercise their rights. The trouble is, we often work in situations where it is not possible to live in a way that is congruent with what we believe in. You might believe in equal rights for all, but your workplace could well be a place where the rights of some people are denied. As your research progresses you might find that you are the one who is denying equal rights to others. You should expect surprises like this.

Action research is a way of working that helps us to identify the values that are important for our lives and to live in the direction of those values, that is, take them as the organising principles of our lives. It is unlikely that we will ever get to a situation where our work and situations are entirely congruent with our values. But we are not aiming for 'end products'; we are aiming to find right ways of living.

What kind of evidence can you gather to show why you are interested?

If you are in a situation where things are not as you would wish them to be, how can you show that situation so that other people can relate to what you are experiencing? How can you show what the situation was like, which made you resolve to do something about it?

You need to gather data about the situation, and you can use a variety of methods for this – journals, diaries, notes, audio and videotape recordings, surveys, attitude scales, pictures, and so on. You can use different data gathering methods at different times if you wish. You will compare this first set of data with later sets of data, to see whether there is any change and whether you can say that you have influenced the situation. Aim to gather as much data as you feel is right; most people gather too much to begin with.

You need to begin identifying working criteria to help you make judgements about whether the situation might be improving. These criteria would be linked with your values. If you believe that all people should be treated fairly, a criterion will be whether you can show that people are being treated fairly. The criteria you identify might change as the research project develops. Your data will turn into evidence when you can show that it meets your nominated criteria.

What can you do about the situation? How do you act in order to influence it in an educative way?

You need to imagine ways in which you might begin taking action. You might want at this stage to consult with others about how you could move forward. These others could be your critical friend or your validation group. A validation group is a group of people you invite to look at your research from time to time, and offer critical feedback. The decisions you come to about what action to take will be your own decisions; you take responsibility for what you do. You need to consider your options carefully and decide what you can reasonably expect to achieve, given the time, energy and other resources you have.

Having decided on a possible strategy, you now need to try it out. It might work and it might not. If it does, you will probably want to continue developing it. If it does not, you will probably abandon it, or part of it, and try something else.

What kind of evidence can you gather to show your

educative influence?

This is your second set of data, which will also turn into evidence by meeting your nominated criteria. You can use the same, or different, data-gathering methods that you used before. Perhaps you used surveys and interviews to gather your first set of data; now you might want to use audio and video tape recordings which will capture not only people's words but also their expressions and body language. You should try to show, through this set of data, whether there is an improvement in the situation, even though that improvement might be very small. You might also be able to show a development in your own thinking and learning. This is an integral part of the action research process.

How do you explain your educative influence?

Remember that the focus of the enquiry is you. You are always in company with others, so what you do is bound to have an influence on them. How can you show that your influence was as you wished it to be? To gauge your impact on them, you need to get their reactions to how they perceive their relationship with you.

Remember that you are not trying to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between you and other people's actions. You are not saying, 'I brought about improvement' or 'I made that happen'. You are saying, 'I can show that certain changes took place as I changed my practice, particularly in myself, and different relationships evolved.' You are aiming to show a development of influence, an unfolding of new understandings and actions from people working together in new ways, and their influence on one another, that is, how they learn with and from one another.

How do you ensure that any judgements you make are reasonably

fair and accurate?

If you say, 'I think that such and such happened', you can expect someone to say, 'Prove it.' The answer is that you can't. You can't prove anything. The word 'prove' does not exist in action research. You can however produce reasonable evidence to suggest that what you feel happened really did happen, and you are not just making it up.

In saying that you believe you have influenced your situation for good, you are making a claim to knowledge. You are also producing evidence to back up the claim. Now you need other people critically to consider your claim and agree that you have good reason for making your claim. They might agree that you are justified in making your claim, and their agreement would be validation of your claim. They might suggest that you need to look at the research again and gather further data, perhaps, or tighten up the link between your data and your criteria. Once you have other people's validation you can say in all honesty, 'I am claiming that I have influenced this situation because I started looking at ways in which I could improve what I am doing, and I now have the endorsement of other people to show that what I say I am doing constitutes a fair and accurate claim.'

How do you modify your practice in the light of your evaluation?

You will probably carry on working in this new way because it seems to be better than the way you were working before. It is more in line with the way you wish things to be.

You are living in the direction of your values (though you might still have far to go).

This does not mean closure. Although you have addressed one issue, others might have emerged which now need attention. Perhaps in addressing one issue, you have unearthed other issues that you had not expected. There is no end, and that is the nature of developmental practices, and part of the joy of doing action research. It resists closure. Each ending is a new beginning. Each event carries its own potentials for new creative forms.

This is what makes action research a powerful methodology for personal and social renewal. You are thinking and searching all the time. You are never complacent or content to leave problematic situations as they are, because you refuse to become complacent or lazy. As long as you remain aware, alert, constantly open to new beginnings, you will continue growing into all the persons you are capable of becoming.

Criteria

There are two sets of criteria you need to give attention to. The first is in relation to your research; the second is in relation to your research report.

Criteria for action research projects

When we wish to make judgements about something to establish its value, we set criteria to help us make those judgements. Criteria are the standards we use to make judgements.

Criteria can be set and expressed through words (verbally) as well as through actions (non-verbally). In most professional contexts, criteria take a traditional verbal form. A checklist might be drawn up which specifies the criteria: 'The person can do such and such'. These criteria are often communicated in terms of behaviours: 'The person can perform a certain task'. Qualifying as a good manager or teacher, therefore, means that you perform appropriately, and a written record is kept of achieved skills and behaviours.

In action research, criteria are set in terms of the values that inform practice. The values might be expressed verbally – 'I believe in fairness in the workplace' – but they are expressed and enacted physically, for example, when you demonstrate or experience fairness. It is important to recognise that the meanings of these embodied values become clear as they emerge during your research. Often at the start of a project they are not immediately clear. You need to think about what is important for your practice and what drives it. The things you believe are important (your values) become your criteria. In the process of clarifying the meanings of your embodied values, as they emerge in practice, you transform your values into your criteria (or standards). You can share these living standards with others, and use them to test the validity of your claims to have influenced the learning of others in an educational way. They are 'living' because they can change during your enquiry (See Part One of Moira Laidlaw's Ph.D. thesis on her search for her educational standards of judgement at <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/moira.shtml>).

To show that you are living in the direction of your values, you need to search your data archive, and produce pieces of data that meet the criteria. When the data match the criteria, those pieces of data become evidence. You use this evidence when you produce your research account and make a claim that you have improved your learning about your situation, and possibly also improved the situation. You make your criteria clear, so that people can see that you are grounding your claim in evidence and it is not only your opinion. You can then say that your practice is evidence based. The evidence you

produce is in terms of how you make judgements about the value of your work.

Criteria for judging the quality of research reports

Action research is part of a transition from ‘traditional scholarship’ to what is called ‘new scholarship’. Traditional forms are still dominant, so action research reports still tend to be judged by traditional criteria. Most of these criteria are technical: for example, does the research show a systematic process of data gathering, analysis and interpretation.

However, while technical criteria are important, they are now complemented by qualitative, experiential ones, such as whether people can relate to and learn from your report. Other criteria can be negotiated. These might include considerations of the kind:

- Do you show that you are trying to live in terms of what you believe in?
- Do you show that you can hold yourself accountable for your claims to knowledge?
- Do you show how you have changed your own thinking and practice, and how this has possibly influenced others educationally?

These kinds of criteria enable you to make professional judgements about whether the quality of your understanding, productive work and relationships has been improved.

Critical friends and validation groups

So that your judgement of your work is not held to be only your opinion, you need to make the work available to the critical scrutiny of others, such as your critical friend and your validation group.

Critical friends

Your critical friend (also called a ‘critical colleague’ or ‘learning partner’) is someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you see it in a new light. Critique is essential for helping us to evaluate the quality of the research. You would ask one or two people to be critical friends from the start of the project.

Your validation group

You would also convene a validation group of 4–10 people. Your critical friend might or might not be a member of the group. They would be drawn from your professional circle, and would agree to meet with you periodically to listen to your progress reports and to scrutinise your data. Although they might not be entirely familiar with your research, they would be able to make professional judgements about the validity of your report, and would offer critical feedback. You should listen carefully to their advice, though you are not compelled to act on it.

Who sets the criteria?

The issue of who sets the criteria is contested. In most professional contexts, criteria are set by ‘experts’, and practitioners are expected to perform appropriately. In action research, practitioners take responsibility for their own work and negotiate their own criteria. This can lead to conflict, when practitioners might challenge the right of others

to control their work, and when struggles take place for the right to be acknowledged as one-who-knows. Action research does empower practitioners; but you need to be aware of the potential fall-out when you claim that you, too, are a legitimate knower.

Action research and professional development

Improving the work you do is about learning to do things in new ways. It is a process of professional learning. This is true whether you are just beginning your career or whether you are in full swing. Learning is for life, not just for college.

Many professional learning programmes work from the point of view of the person who is conducting them ('delivering' them in much contemporary language). The emphasis is often on teaching or training, not so much on learning. The assumption is that the trainer knows the answers and passes them on to you, and then supervises you to make sure you are applying them correctly. This delivery model is widespread and often unquestioned.

When action research informs professional development programmes, they work from the point of view of the person who is learning. It is assumed that you already know a great deal. Perhaps your knowledge is intuitive or only roughly worked out, but you still have the answers in yourself, ready for the right stimulus to set them off. You don't need a trainer so much as a supporter, or critical friend, who will listen to your ideas, challenge them, and help you to find alternatives. This kind of facilitative model means that the supporter is also learning; they are not expected to have answers to your workplace-based questions. They actively learn with and from you; it is a dialogue of equals. Of course, being an effective supporter means developing a high level of interpersonal skills, sensitivity and wisdom. Developing these skills is a research process. Your supporter is asking questions such as, 'How do I help you to learn and find out your own answers?' You have formed a community of critically questioning, caring colleagues.

Doing action research helps you to grow professionally, to show how you are extending your own professional knowledge. It does this in many ways, including the following:

- Doing your research helps you to examine your own practice and see whether it lives up to your own expectations of yourself in your work. If you say you hold certain values, how can you show that you are living in their direction?
- By showing other people what you are doing, you can establish a systematic evaluation procedure. If you are a manager, you are showing how you are supporting the learning of those in your organisation, and you can say why you think this is happening. You can produce clear evidence to show progress. You can let the voices of others come through to explain how their learning has improved because of your intervention. If they say that you don't seem to be helping them, you can try to change the situation so that you are.
- You can identify the criteria, or standards, that you and others are using to judge the quality of what you are doing. You identify how you understand your professionalism, in negotiation with others, and you show how you are trying to live in this way.

You should always try to maintain your professional learning. Too often people assume that once they have achieved qualified status, they don't need to learn any more. How do you understand professional learning? Are you in a stable place, where you believe you have learnt all there is to know? Are you going to learn for the next six months, and then take a rest? Or are you going to regard learning as a lifelong process that is as

natural as breathing? It is your choice.

Why do action research?

Sometimes people criticise action research as idle self-contemplation. This is not so. People do action research as a way of helping them understand how they can influence social change. This commitment is contained in Marx's idea that it is not enough only to understand the world; the intent is to change it for the better.

Action research questions take the form, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' This question has an underlying intent to help other people, on the following principles:

- You decide to investigate what you are doing with a view to improving it.
- This will help you to understand the situation more fully.
- Your developed understanding will help you to evaluate your work and change it as necessary.
- Your way of working might influence others; how can show this?
- You do this by checking your perceptions of what is happening against theirs.
- You change your way of working in light of their perceptions. You negotiate this with them.
- Your collective agreement about these things helps you all to understand the situation better.
- You learn from colleagues, and they learn from you. They decide to try things out for themselves.
- They invite you to become their critical friend, and help them evaluate their work.
- Collectively you are now a community of enquirers. You have changed your social situation, and this is bound to have consequences for wider social contexts.
- Your individual 'I-enquiry' has turned into a collective 'we-enquiry'. You have moved from 'I' to 'we'.

It is not just that you as an individual are investigating your work. You are aware of the reasons underpinning your work, and how it might impact on others. Action research contains a deep commitment by responsible practitioners to hold themselves accountable for their own ways of living and working. You cannot accept responsibility for anyone else (apart from contexts of pathology, or contexts involving babies and young children). You must, however, accept responsibility for yourself. Unless you are prepared to be accountable for yourself, you cannot expect other people to do the same.

The need for case study evidence

It is not enough just to talk about these things. We need to show how we are practising what we preach, otherwise the ideas remain in the imagination and do not move into reality. One of the strengths of action research is that it begins in practice, and people generate their own theories out of their practice. Action researchers are real people in real situations.

There is an overwhelming need for the production of case stories to show how researchers improved their own learning and situations for the benefit of themselves and others. Bodies of case study evidence are growing in books and on web sites (see www.actionresearch.net). The more case studies that appear, the more powerful the body of knowledge becomes. These bodies of knowledge present undeniable evidence that action research constitutes a form of learning that has profound implications for the

future of society.

Action research for a good social order

Seen in this way, action research is something people do in order to improve the quality of life for themselves and for others. It is a way of working that begins with individuals asking themselves, 'How do I improve what I am doing for your sake?' The intention is that one person becomes self-evaluative in order to work better for others with whom they are in company.

This applies not only to the individual action researcher, but to all. We move away from the delivery model of 'I tell you what to do'. No one person tells another what to do. It is a two-way, reciprocal partnership. Everyone (not only one individual) needs to ask, 'How do I improve what I am doing for your sake?' Each one has to accept the responsibility of their own actions and lives. Each person aims to be a better individual so that, collectively, they can contribute to the formation of a better society.

People often point out the hard political realities of living and working within social and professional contexts. The realities are that particular ways have become established, and these ways are protected by people who are happy with the status quo. These ways of working become established structures, and individuals are often deliberately silenced, and sometimes vanish, within these structures. Some people say it is not possible to change established ways. Action researchers would respond that this is not so. First, we have to believe that it is possible to change things, otherwise we might as well give up right now on every effort and programme to improve the quality of life – medical research, world adventure and exploration ... If we live in hope, at least we have some idea of what we can achieve. If we do not, we can be sure of a zero outcome. Action research is one way to influence social change. If everyone did a bit extra for someone else, the world would instantly be a happier and more productive place for all.

Whole organisation development

Given these ideas of how individuals can work together to create their own societies, it is not difficult to imagine how whole organisation development may be encouraged. Each individual undertakes their personal enquiry into an aspect of their own practice, and then shares that enquiry with others, and together they form research collectives. These collectives can systematically evaluate the practice of one individual, or they might ask their own collective questions about how they can improve their understanding and circumstances. Much social and community development happens along these lines.

Managing organisational change

The concept of collective involvement can be particularly challenging for people positioned as managers, for they may need to develop new ways of thinking and working, as well as new self-perceptions, that might be at odds with traditional views. Managers might need to change their ideas about what they are managing and how they are doing so. In traditional models, managers manage other people. How they do that is a matter of personal style. In action research ways, managers arrange for the conditions of learning to be right. They arrange for organisational structures, processes and resources to encourage individual learning to take place. When individual learning in organisational contexts becomes collective learning, this can then be called

organisational learning.

How managers do this is important. Traditionally managers were expected to be aloof from the workforce, and direct operations from a distance. They arranged for other people to learn. In action research, managers also become learners, learning with the people they support, though the focus of their enquiries shows their concern to fulfil their different responsibilities. Unless managers are willing to acknowledge themselves as learners, they might be denying the very principles they say they are espousing. This can be threatening for many managers, because it involves destabilisation, risk and personal courage, but it can also be liberating and exciting. Whether or not you wish to engage is your choice.

Supporting professional development

Traditional professional development programmes tend to operate from a subject base. The aim is to help practitioners to improve subject knowledge and expertise. They also operate from an advisory base. Support is offered by a subject adviser. The model underpinning this model is a model of teaching (often instruction).

Support for professional development through action research builds on a model of learning, where practitioners are challenged and helped to find new ways of doing things. The emphasis is on practice rather than subject knowledge. The route is personal enquiry (What do I do?) rather than others' advice (What do you think I should do?). In traditional ways, an adviser advises practitioners; practitioners implement the advice; the adviser evaluates outcomes. In action research approaches, the practitioner talks through ideas with a listening supporter; the practitioner acts; the practitioner evaluates outcomes in company with the adviser and others.

Relationships

This model has profound implications for professional relationships. In traditional ways, a power relationship often exists between adviser and practitioner. This relationship is often subtle, but the effects can be obvious, from practitioners' lack of confidence to deskilling. Nor is the situation educational for the supporter, who is expected to have all the answers.

In action research approaches there is a genuine sense of partnership, where practitioner and supporter recognise that there might be a difference in responsibilities and professional expertise, but no difference in value. They are equal as practitioners. Both are there to improve their work by acting as challenging and supportively critical colleagues, each for the other. This is a creative dialogue of equals in which both are trying to find the best way forward for themselves and each other.

Accreditation

Practitioners have the right to have their work formally recognised, if they wish. This often takes the form of professional certificates and awards.

Most award-bearing courses internationally recognise the validity of action research approaches, which embody professional wisdom as well as technical know-that and practical know-how. Personal enquiry and forms of self study are acknowledged as equally valuable forms of research as traditional empirical investigations. Some

organisations are developing programmes of personal reflective practice as frameworks for organisational learning.

This reconceptualisation of what constitutes valid educational theory and research, with its emphasis on the person-centred, open-ended nature of living systems, is accompanied by a growing awareness of the need for increased access to opportunity for all. Professional development programmes increasingly take the form of distance learning, modularisation, flexible learning, personal self study, all addressing the needs of the learner within particular contexts. New technologies are contributing to new ways of learning, with the development of e-colleges and e-learning processes. These developments are new, and appropriate ways have to be developed for sustaining educative conversations using multimedia technologies (for important innovative work, see <http://www.compapp.dcu.ie/~mfarren> and <http://www.living-action-research.net/>).

There are significant opportunities for action researchers to have their professional learning accredited through award-bearing courses. These awards can be Masters and Doctoral degrees. The influence of action research around the world is significant. There is a real awareness that if governments wish their citizens to become productive and adaptive workforces in the 21st Century, professional learning has to be given the highest priority, and supported by democratic structures that value individual learning as the basis for collective practices.

End note

Dear friend,

I hope you like what you have read so far. If you have any suggestions about how the text might be improved, do contact me by e-mail on <mailto:106642.1700@compuserve.com>

Also, if you have ideas for further pages, please let me know. I already have some in process, but perhaps what appears here is sufficient for just now.

Thanks for your reading, thanks for your company.

Best wishes,

Jean McNiff

[HOME](#)

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